

Michigan Senate
Committee on Natural Resources, Environment, and Great Lakes
Comments on SB-78 and biodiversity stewardship areas

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Thank you for the opportunity to present some comments this morning on SB 78 and the designation of biodiversity areas in our Michigan State Forests.

My name is Mike Vasievich and I have lived in East Lansing since 1986. I am retired from the USDA Forest Service where I worked for 32 years as a research scientist and project leader for forest management, economics, and policy research for what is now the Forest Service's Northern Research Station. I also spent 6 years as the branch chief for the USFS Natural Resource Information System which involved designing and implementing the corporate databases for resource and human dimensions data for all of the National Forests. I have both Master of Forestry and PhD degrees from Duke University and an undergraduate degree in biology with a focus on ecology. I have served as an adjunct member of the faculties at Duke and Michigan State for more than 30 years. Since retiring in 2006, I have been the owner of a small consulting firm, Tessa Systems, that provides analytical studies related to forest inventory, markets, and trends for various public agencies, private firms, and non-governmental organizations.

I would like to make several points this morning.

Our forests are abundant and diverse

Michigan is blessed to have abundant and diverse forest resources – more than 20 million acres. Michigan ranks seventh in the nation in terms of the amount of forestland among all states.

Our forests reflect a wonderful story of restoration from the devastating harvesting that took place in the late 1800's and early 1900's. That came about through good laws, wise management, and time.

The condition of our forests is, in my opinion, quite good in comparison with other states. Our forests are growing considerably faster than they are harvested. They are highly diverse and many silvicultural and harvesting practices are in place to protect and preserve that diversity.

Biodiversity is important

Michiganders (or Michiganians if you prefer) care greatly about our forests and forested areas. They value them for outdoor recreation and abundant wildlife, productive timber and clean waters, hiking, and even solitude and inspirational wild places. They value forests for the economic benefit to communities as well. In fact, many of our rural communities, "up north" are highly dependent on employment related to both extractive forest products and active recreation.

I have no doubt that healthy and diverse forests are important to a broad spectrum of people in Michigan. Protecting unique areas that represent rare ecosystems is a valid goal. However, reservation of large areas of additional lands to protect diversity that is already present on existing managed lands or already protected by other public landowners presents significant opportunity costs for little additional benefit.

Substantial areas are already protected from development

Protected areas are not in short supply in Michigan's forests. In an analysis that we compiled in 2012, we found that there were already over one-million acres of land in Michigan that were under some significant degree of protection. These areas included federal, state, local, and private lands. In fact, the four million acres of state forests and the three million acres of federal forests are largely already protected from the greatest threat to our forestlands - commercial development.

Two real questions arise from the premise of preserving more areas for any specific purpose –

- (1) how much area should be withdrawn and set aside for protected from human activities; and
- (2) what is the State's role in designating ADDITIONAL lands as biological preserves or other purposes.

Right now, the Michigan DNR has full authority to withdraw any or all lands simply if their preference would be to lock them up for biodiversity. Once designated, such areas cannot be undesignated for all practical purposes.

The answer to these questions should not be an administrative decision made by the staff of the Michigan DNR or any other executive branch agency.

Rather, the permanent designation of protected areas, whether for parks or wilderness areas or biological preserves should be subject to the oversight and approval of the legislature.

And, in each case, the merits of such a designation should be carefully considered in a public forum along with the costs and benefits to the people of the State. The DNR should show why the goal of conserving biological diversity (or other protective purpose)

is not already met on other lands or on other ownerships. The bottom line is that decisions to withdraw lands to create permanent biological preserves should be made with considerable deliberation by the legislature.

Protecting areas is a legislative function

Over time, it may be desirable to protect special or unique areas from uses that may be undesirable or destructive. We've done this throughout our history on public lands by enacting federal, state and local laws to establish protection for certain areas such as designated wilderness, research natural areas, biological preserves, parks, historical areas, water supply areas, and the like. In each case, legislation was the designating mechanism and substantial public review of the economic and social costs and benefits were explored. Allowing public agencies to simply make rules to designate areas for permanent protection without legislative approval circumvents the public trust.

SB-78 proposes what I would consider a somewhat inflexible approach to protection of areas for biodiversity. Severely restricting the DNR from considering biodiversity takes away an important element of scientific forest management. A better approach to the issue of wholesale restrictions of lands made by administrative fiat is to improve the process whereby certain unique parcels can be recognized and protected, if appropriate by legislative action.

It would be more effective to simply state that the legislature has the sole authority to designate and approve lands owned by the State for specific permanent protection.